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Making Gender with Things

Chelen Amenca (Dance with us)

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Chelen Amenca (Dance with us)

Ellen ROTHENBERG

In summer 2012, artists Ellen Rothenberg and Delia Popa participated in a cultural exchange project with a Roma family living in a small agrarian village in the county of Sibiu, a historic area in Transylvania. The second part of the project, an exhibition of new works generated in response to this experience, was presented at The Contemporary Galleries of The Brukenthal National Museum in fall 2013. “*Chelen Amenca, (Dance With Us)*” was organized by curator Anca Mihuleț, with assistance for the village stay from anthropologist Oana Burcea. The exhibition and community project was realized with institutional support from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brukenthal National Museum, and the Astra Museum Complex. In 2014, both artists presented performance/lectures based on their research at the National University of the Arts in Bucharest, with a grant from CEC Artslink.

here to there

Geographic scale is a means of staging the world and situating oneself in it. Scale is often understood descriptively as a hierarchical scheme for ordering space, but the production of scale is an inherently political act wherein the multiple arenas of social life are constituted and identity is negotiated. Geographic scale resonates with tension between what is held within a space and the lines drawn between spaces.

Cindi Katz, “*Spaces of Possibility/Spaces of Change*” (1994)¹

¹ Cindi KATZ. 1994. Spaces of Possibility/Spaces of Change: the personal geography of Ellen Rothenberg. In *Ellen Rothenberg*, ed. Johanna BRANSON, 41-52. Medford, Mass.: Tufts University Art Gallery.

braid

Stretching across the space of the Gallery for Contemporary Art at the Brukenthal National Museum, this sculptural work encircles the marble pillar at its architectural center before slicing back through space at eye level. Fifteen meters in length and six centimeters wide, the braid of red cotton woven with blue, green, and gold threads has weight and presence in the all-white neutrality of the gallery. Referencing both the traditional hair braiding of women and girls of the Clopotar family of the Cotorari Roma, the sculpture underlines its gendered presence through the textile itself, a fabric commonly used for women's skirts. The scale of the work and its commanding presence in the social space of the contemporary gallery – a site for new ideas – imagines future possibilities of greater agency for traditional women without the surrender of their unique identities to the dominant culture. The sculpture traces a line from the village of Igishu Vecchi to the urban capital, connecting the marginalized community of Roma women to the authorized cultural center of Sibiu.

open borders >< edge spaces

More than a frontier between first and second skins, clothing can be seen as an interval or area of contact between body and surrounding space, place or tertiary system of difference ... to the social and cultural, architectural and visual, natural and visible environments.

Germano Celant, "To Cut is to Think" (1997)²

Roma traditional dress is a vital cultural form, an expressive materialization of their history and identity. It defines social relations and identifies family systems of belonging, which are the core of Roma society and culture. In Romania, as in the rest of Europe, the Roma are people apart. In this post-Ceausescu era of fewer state controls and supports, they remain marginalized outsiders with little economic or social opportunities. Here, as in the larger European

² Germano CELANT. 1997. To Cut is to Think. In *Art/fashion*, ed. Germano CELANT. New York: Art publishers-Skira, p. 25.

Union of open borders but destabilized economies, the Roma are all too frequently victims of racism and xenophobia. Their traditional dress essential to their cultural survival makes them easy targets for violence and persecution. How to sustain a vibrant Roma culture in today's Europe remains a significant question and critical concern.

skirt

A complex construction of pleats extending from waistband to the ground, the skirt is completed with a lace edged apron. Along with a headscarf, the red plaid or floral print skirt is the signature garment of married women of the Cotorari Roma.

Worn over plastic work sandals, the skirt is a graceful red form against the green of the fields. It is gathered while cleaning out the barn or cooking over a fire and grate. Their scarves are tied in the back at the neck, their arms are covered with the sleeves of fitted tops, worn layered with red acrylic sweaters in cool weather. Red, the predominate color of their garments, is a brilliant identifying hue. Here a woman owns many skirts, some for work, others for more festive or formal occasions, worn with red heels to town, and market. You see skirts washed clean, drying in the sun on a fence in the courtyard of the family home. Folded and carefully stacked, the skirts are stored behind wooden wardrobe doors. These are women in skirts.

The relation between body and architecture is associated with the visible cladding. Walls define bodies... from the outside in. Walls provide a second container after dress...

Katarina Bonnevier, "A queer analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027" (2005)³

wardrobe

In the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order. Order is not merely geometrical; it can also remember the family history.

Gaston Bachelard, "The Poetics of Space" (1958)⁴

³ Katarina BONNEVIER. 2005. A queer analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027. In *Negotiating Domesticity*. London: Routledge, p. 168.

Dear Marica,

It's been five months since we saw each other, I'm in Chicago now, it's well into Fall and getting cold. This must also be the case in your Igishu Vechi, the tiled stove where you stored your bread this summer must now be filled with wood or coal to heat the house.

I've been looking at the photographs of our time with you, the children, the family - and other images of the village: horses with wagons on their way to the fields, the chickens and geese running through yards, under gates and across the road. All of these images are in my thoughts today.

Without being able to speak together except in the language of gesture and the shared expressions of mothers - even so it was clear how ambitious you are for your family. Thank you for sharing your house with us. That first day as we walked with the children from home to home and entered your house, you turned to say, (as if to translate what you had accomplished) "it's clean here." You clearly sensed my curiosity and your invitation to go back to the house again without the others was such an opportunity.

You opened the wardrobe to share a "library" of textiles, neatly folded and stacked to a height well above your head. They were organized in distinct categories vertically: the heavier woven rugs at the bottom, next bedcovers and table drapes, decorative textiles for the walls and to frame each doorway, curtains, and at the top thick stacks of brilliant red cotton woven with lines of green, blue, and gold the signature fabrics for skirts. It is a comprehensive dowry for your daughters Nina and Bebe.

There was your cache of brown leather shoes in multiple sizes, pyramid stacks of pillows, layers of lace over patterns of cloth covering the windows. The placement of the plastic flower arrangement on the table, ropes of tinsel draped across the dishes and glasses on the shelves, even the bucket (for washing?) on the stool - everything placed with intentional display.

You served us cold drinks in wine glasses and took me into the pink living room with masonry walls, painted decorative edging and stencil designs. The rooms opened onto each other - living room, turquoise kitchen, the room where you slept with the girls and at the end yet another room. How did you make this happen?

Maybe your husband had brought the wine glasses back from Italy on one of his travels, the brown shoes from Hungary? His black felt hat rested at the top of the wardrobe, signaling his presence. In June Igishu was a community of women and children and in this absence was an

⁴ Gaston BACHELARD. 1989 [1957]. *La poétique de l'espace*. Paris: PUF, p. 83.

opportunity to show and see the house with an intimacy that wouldn't have been possible at other times but I didn't know that then,

The final night of the workshop Delia and I were happy to be able to stay with you. It was quiet in the middle of the night when I went outside with my flashlight everyone in the village was asleep except for the dogs.

One afternoon you showed me your fields and spoke of future plans for a new barn.

How do you envision what lies ahead?

There are so many things I'd like to know but there wasn't time to ask:

What does the color red mean to you?

Will you have a well for water at the house someday also?

What do you want for your daughters, and their future...

How do you imagine them?

But enough questions! I send all best wishes, friendship and gratitude for all your hospitality last summer.

Hope to see you,

Best greetings to Nina and Bebe and all in Igishu Vechi!

Ellen

propositional space: home + studio

The studio has been as specific as a landscape or as small as a kitchen table. It had been a closet become an editing room... it has become as high and as wide as a barn, partly filled with the accumulation of what I make, have made, and am forced to caretake.

Carolee Schneeman, "The Studio", June 22, 2009"⁵

Much like a studio, Marica's house is a propositional space, a site of the imaginary. Organized and scrubbed spotless, the rooms project possibilities outside those ascribed to Roma communities by the

⁵ Carolee SCHNEEMAN. 2010. The Studio, June 22, 2009. In *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, ed. Marie Jane JACOB & Michelle GRABNER. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 154.

culture at large. This visual environment of color, pattern, and detail is a place of work, a handmade space producing possible futures. Every surface and object in the interior inflects this intention and purpose.

Like all spaces that multi-task, it is a site of multiple agendas both domestic and familial. Residue fragments of past events, accumulated histories are markers throughout. It's a performative space for rehearsing alternative outcomes. Is it possible to say that a space is restless, unsettled? It moves beyond its location - an unpaved road in a rural village at the margins - with imagination (for better opportunities.) The critical function of this home/studio as "site of resistance and radical possibility" is clearly delineated by writer and feminist theorist, bell hooks, in her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness."

We looked both from the outside in and the inside out. We focused our intention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of the whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that part of that whole.

bell hooks, "Feminist Theory from Margin to Center" (2000)⁶

village: seeing with the eyes and feet

November

Dear Bebe,

Here in Chicago it's early in the morning and still dark outside, I woke thinking about all of you, made a cup of mint tea, and sat down to write this letter. Right now In Igishu Vechi it's just after lunchtime, you must be still at school in the next village.

I remember our first day with you in the village. We arrived and unloaded the food we brought to share, knowing that your mother and grandmother would be cooking for us, it's a Roma custom always to feed guests before they leave. We walked past the gate and into your grandmother's house. You took my hand.

⁶ bell hooks. 2000 [1984]. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Cambridge: South End Press, p. xvi.



Later that day, or maybe it was the next – after working for several hours we took a walk, all of us together, a tour of the village. And this became a daily event to walk through and around the village. We traveled in a pack, greeting everyone sitting on benches outside their gates, and working in their gardens. We set out in different directions, past the church, past the neighbors living next door who aren't Roma. One day our route was down to the main road off to the store to buy cigarettes for the mothers or your grandmother. Another day off to the side road past the community building that used to be the village school before it was closed so you and the others have to travel to school in the next village. We walked past the garden walls and gates of abandoned houses, there are many places in the village that no longer are occupied. You showed us the wild plums, small yellow fruit, which we could pick and eat. When we reached one edge of the village, stepping off the dirt lane and into the trees to pick plums, your grandfather passed us. It was just a quick glance, as he passed driving the horse and wagon on his way to the fields to pick up the others who were helping to harvest. As he passed he shook his head at the sight of us picking plums, standing in the weeds with you children, hanging out at the edge of the village. And I thought - "what are we doing here?"

You told us that if anything happened to you, it was your grandmother who is responsible. So we kept you close to us calling out for you when you ran ahead or stopped at the next tree for more fruit. You asked me why I wear pants, when all the women in your family and the village wear skirts, why my nails are long. On the way back we passed your aunt standing at the open doorway of the church. She called out a greeting and told you not to show off as you looked through Delia's camera and took a picture of her turning on the threshold and then a photo of the sky. It was going to rain later.

That evening our driver couldn't locate the house in the village. Everyone was walking in circles or standing at the windows - an arm extended at angles pointing phones toward the sky trying to find a connection. It was late when he finally found us and we left the village to go to Sibiu. The trip was slow, we stopped as the cows coming from the fields walked themselves home entering the doorways they knew well, who knew cows were so smart?

Bebe, given a chance you can do anything! Work hard at your reading and playing! Say hello to everyone for me and please write a letter when you can.

Sending greetings from far away,

Ellen